



'ONE SOLUTION! REVOLUTION!'

Pro-Palestine Comets reject meeting conditions with President Benson after week of protests



A coalition of UTD student organizations hosted a walkout April 23, which began in the TI Plaza and evolved into a seven-hour sit-in occupying the Administration Building, which was followed by continued demonstrations until the meeting April 26



PHOTOS BY SURJADITYA SARKAR | MERCURY STAFF

ANDRÉ AVERION
Mercury Staff

FATIMAH AZEEM
Editor-in-Chief

At the climax of a nearly 10-hour long demonstration April 23, representatives from Students for Justice in Palestine and UTD's Cabinet of the President agreed to a meeting to discuss the concerns of Palestinian students. During the meeting April 26, SJP representatives delivered a letter to Benson, refusing to speak with him, before leaving.

SJP's rejection of the meeting comes after almost six months of protests at UTD calling for administrators to ac-

knowledge the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. SJP, Palestinian Youth Movement and UTD Divest hosted April 23's demonstration, called "UTD Take Back Our Campus." Demonstrators had three demands:

first, for UTD to reject Gov. Greg Abbott's executive order GA-44, which specifically singles out SJP organizations when obliging universities to punish antisemitism and is a threat to freedom of speech according to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. Second, for President Richard Benson to release a public statement denouncing the "ongoing genocidal campaign against the Palestinian people" — according to SJP's Instagram — and call for an im-

mediate permanent cease-fire in Gaza. Third, for UTD to divest from military contractors that sell weapons to Israel, like Raytheon Technologies, Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman and General Dynamics. SJP's April 26 letter said it rejected the meeting with the Office of the President on the grounds that Benson would also be meeting with "Zionist organization."

"We categorically reject the attempt to establish a premise that there are 'two sides' to a literal genocide," Mousa Najjar, SJP president and computer science senior, said while reading a copy of the letter aloud at a demonstration in the Administration Building April 26. "We refuse to be pacified, we refuse

for our message to be co-opted and we refuse to be intimidated."

On April 23, approximately 100 protesters gathered at the Plinth at 1 p.m., calling for an end to the war in Gaza and for UTD to divest from military contractors. After marching down the Rutherford pedestrian walkway, demonstrators gathered to pray for Gaza in front of Administration Building (AD) before entering the building at 3 p.m. and staging a sit-in on the second floor — which leads to Benson's office — until 10 p.m. UTDPD maintained a presence throughout the entire event and began blocking two out of the three main entrances into the building because of fire hazard concerns. On April 24, SJP hosted a second day of sit-ins at AD's lawn. On April 26, 150 students and community members organized a sit-in on the admin lawn



Top: Protesters carry banners with pro-divestment slogans as they march near SSA. Left: A demonstration leader marches with a megaphone. Top right: Students occupy AD, staging a sit-in. Bottom right: Protesters gather at the Plinth.

while SJP representatives visited administration.

"After consistent divestment efforts, two passed Student Government resolutions, dozens of events and literally hundreds of tablings, we have heard nothing from administration until today," alumnus Nidaa Lafi, a former president of SJP, said during the sit-in. "If this shows us anything, it shows us that pressure works. Being in this building, this disgusting overheated building for [hours] does something right."

While in the building, students made phone calls to Benson, Vice President of Student Affairs Gene Fitch and Dean of Students Amanda Smith to force administrators' attention onto their demands. Demonstration leaders said they spoke with Vice President Rafael Martin later that night, who confirmed by email around 9 p.m. that he'd be in touch before the end of the day to schedule a meeting between Benson, two members of his leadership team and pro-Palestinian student representatives.

"We are still here making Palestine unavoidable on this campus," said Nour Saad, SJP secretary and a healthcare management senior during the sit-in. "We mobilize to illustrate our devotion to the cause and our belief in liberation. In mobilizing, protesting and keeping the conversation about Palestine alive, we students stand as the beating heart of the movement."

In a statement to the press, UTD said it would also meet separately with a Jewish student group for the same purpose. Jade Steinberg, a psychology freshman and President of UTD Hillel, said they received an invitation from administrators to attend this meeting, which has been delayed according to Steinberg.

"We are going to be at the meeting and calling on Benson to help make the university a more safe and inclusive space for all students," Steinberg said.

Steinberg, who was present at the UTD demonstration holding an Israeli flag alongside four other counter-protesters, said they find chants such

as "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" offensive toward Jewish students. GA-44, which will take effect June 25, states the phrase is antisemitic because it has been used by Hamas supporters to advocate for the violent dismantling of Israel.

"From my perspective ... there is becoming a normalization of antisemitism, of hate and bigotry against us that has made us feel extremely unsafe, extremely threatened," Steinberg said.

The protest was part of a larger national movement which has spawned at least 40 Gaza solidarity encampments, at the time of publication, at universities across the U.S., including Columbia, MIT and UC Berkeley. UTD protesters were in communication with students at Columbia in New York, which has seen 150 students and faculty arrested at their solidarity encampment as of April 24, adding to the 600 student activists arrested across the nation as of April 27. In response

— Nidaa Lafi

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TIPA
Texas Intercollegiate Press Association*The Mercury* is a proud member of both the Associated Collegiate Press and the Texas Intercollegiate Press Association.

Police Blotter

April 10

A person struck an unattended vehicle in Lot Q and received a fine.

**April 14**

A person was found possessing drug paraphernalia in Capella Hall, and the incident is still under investigation.

**April 15**

A burglary was reported in University Village Phase 8A. The incident is still under investigation.

**LEGEND**

- VEHICULAR INCIDENT
- THEFT
- DRUGS & ALCOHOL
- OTHER

TAKE BACK THE NIGHT

ARDRA TRIVEDI

A crowd gathered around flickering candles arranged next to the Reflection Pool the night of April 23 as representatives from rape crisis centers and UTD student organizations stood in honor of sexual assault survivors.

The event, called Take Back the Night, took place at the Chess Plaza and included speeches from speakers from organizations including Turning Point Rape Crisis Center, Dallas Rape Crisis Center and Crissa's Community Outreach. Student Government organized the ceremony to honor Sexual Assault Awareness Month, including a march around campus with signs like "Sexy does not mean sex me," a T-shirt display and a candlelight vigil.

Nandita Kumar, a public policy sophomore and the Diversity, Equity and Belonging Committee Chair for Student Government, organized the event based on similar events held by the Clothesline Project, a non-profit that aims to encourage and empower sexual assault survivors. Two weeks prior, students and community leaders alike wrote messages affirming the experiences of survivors, such as "remember the shame is not on you" and "I won't stay quiet so you can be comfortable" on t-shirts showcased at the event.

"Seeing more than 50 shirts being made in the short time we had was amazing," Kumar said. "We had a lot of students come by and share their personal experiences as to why this project was important to them."

Nicole Wingard volunteers with the Turning Point rape crisis center, an organization that provides counseling and education for sexual trauma, and uses her podcast "Rise Above" to advocate for sexual assault awareness. Wingard is running for Miss Texas and hopes to help survivors in their recovery through her advocacy.

"It happened my freshman year of college, and I stayed silent for the duration of my college career," Wingard said. "I dealt with a lot of shame and guilt and believed a lot of the stereotypes that people have around sexual assault. Last year, I went through my own healing process, and I really felt convicted to make this my platform. I think it is really powerful in pageantry. I think a lot of times people look at pageant girls and they think that they



Top left: SG was inspired by the Clothesline Project, which aims to empower sexual assault survivors. **Top right:** the April 23 event included a march around campus. **Bottom left:** Clareth Mota-Beeks, the communications coordinator for Turning Point Rape Crisis Center, appeared at the event to explain what resources the organization provides.

are perfect, they are so beautiful, how could anything happen to them? And it just shatters those stereotypes."

Leslie Hernandez is the Community Engagement specialist at the Dallas Area Rape Crisis Center, or DARCC, which provides advocacy, counseling, community outreach and education. Hernandez attributes her passion for working at DARCC to her mother and her experience as a part of the Latino community.

"[Sexual assault], to this day, is very taboo [in the Latino culture]," Hernandez said. "This has happened in my family, my mother

and her sisters ... I like to work with Latino-based communities, where it's very taboo."

Crissa's Community Outreach, or CCO, was co-founded by supply chain management sophomore Zaina Asad and political science sophomore Alisa Model in remembrance of Michelle Crissa, a woman who suffered a four-year abusive relationship at the hands of her partner, who killed her in 1989. Asad said that she was inspired to start CCO both by Crissa's story and by what she described as the public's lack of knowledge people about Title IX. Asad said CCO is addressing this knowledge gap by creating an accessible guide from

survivors and for survivors to navigate Title IX. The guide will address dilemmas people have experienced while filing complaints under the Title IX, and is expected to be released at the end of April.

"It's not easy to relive those experiences, but our hope is that this is going to help close the gap within UTD for something that we don't feel like is addressed enough," Asad said. "And we really hope that in the future this can help people navigate the system."

If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted, you can contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673.

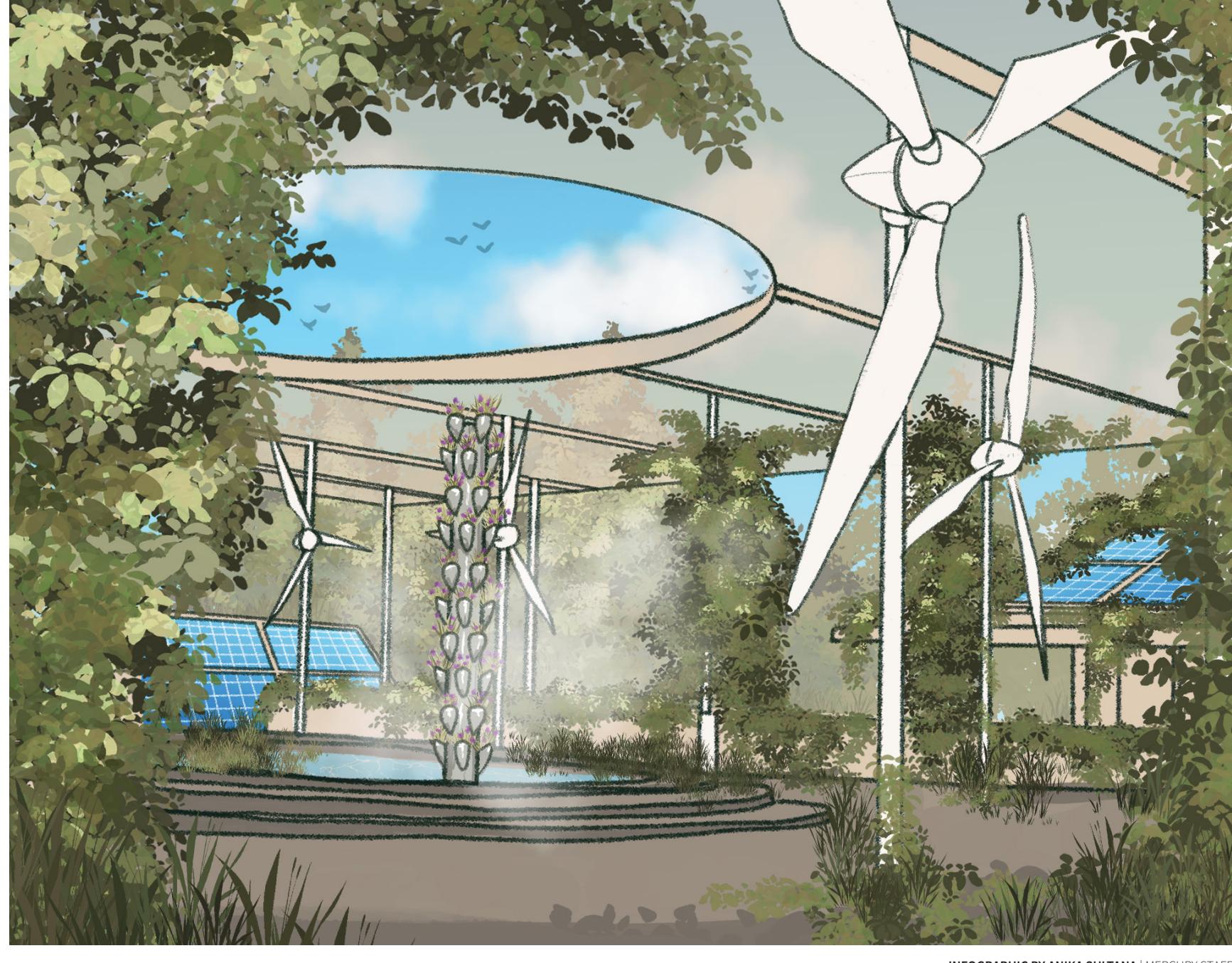
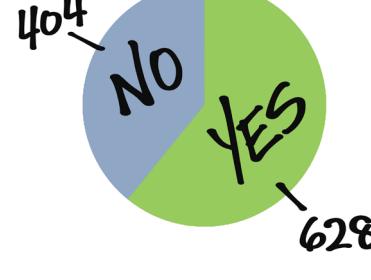
Green Fee Referendum passes with 61% support

The referendum's passage will implement a \$5 fee per semester to fund student-led sustainability projects on campus

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
News Editor

The Green Fee Referendum passed April 26. Of the 1,032 Comets who voted in the referendum, held from April 24 to 26, 628 students voted in favor of the environmental service fee, and 404 students voted against it. With a 224-vote victory margin, the process to implement the fee will move forward; the next step is for the UT System Board of Regents to review and approve it. Associate Vice President of Student Affairs Chad Thomas said he expects the fee to be implemented by the 2025-2026 academic year if no unexpected delays arise. Students on variable tuition plans and all incoming freshmen in the year of implementation will pay the \$5 fee for fall and spring semesters, as well as \$2.50 during summer semesters. The money collected from the fee will be pooled into a Green Fund that will fund environment-focused initiatives on campus. UTD can legally charge students the environmental service fee for five years before it is renewed through a bond process, otherwise incorporated into tuition or simply eliminated.

Green Fee Referendum



INFOGRAPHIC BY ANIKA SULTANA | MERCURY STAFF
ILLUSTRATION BY GRACE COWGER | MERCURY STAFF

In memoriam: professor and Director of Guitar Studies remembered

Professor Enric Madriguera dies after 44-year tenure at UTD

ANDRÉ AVERION
Mercury Staff

Enric Madriguera, UTD's Director of Guitar Studies and first Russell Cleveland Professor in Guitar Studies died April 14.

Madriguera was one of the most accomplished guitarists in UTD's history and a pillar of the Dallas guitar community. His 44-year tenure at the university included international classical guitar study, the founding of the UTD Guitar Series and the co-founding of the Annual Texas Guitar Competition and Festival at UTD. His contributions to critically acclaimed music in Latin America and local music programs caught the eye of Russell Cleveland, an internationally renowned collector of historically significant classical and acoustic guitars, who endowed Madriguera with the professorship in 2009, making him the first recipient of this honor.

"I really think that no university or institution is complete without a solid music department," Madriguera said to *The Mercury* in a 2017 interview.

SEE MADRIGUERA, PAGE 5



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In memoriam: founder, former director of ATEC dies

Thomas Linehan, founder of AHT program, dies at the age of 80

ANDRÉ AVERION
Mercury Staff

Thomas Linehan, founder of the Arts and Technology program and the former director of the Institute for Interactive Arts and Engineering at UTD, died at the age of 80 at the Oxford Glen memory care residence on April 11.

During his tenure at UTD between 2002 and 2009, Linehan led the development of the Institute for Interactive Arts and Engineering and opened one of the nation's first motion capture and virtual reality laboratories. His work eventually led to the UT System Board of Regents approving what is today known as the Harry W. Bass Jr. School of Arts, Humanities and Technology in 2015. In 2007, he was honored as the university's first Arts and Humanities Distinguished Chair in gratitude for his advancements in pioneering computer animation.

Linehan received his bachelor's degree in



UTD | COURTESY

SEE LINEHAN, PAGE 5

Cecil and Ida Green Center demolished

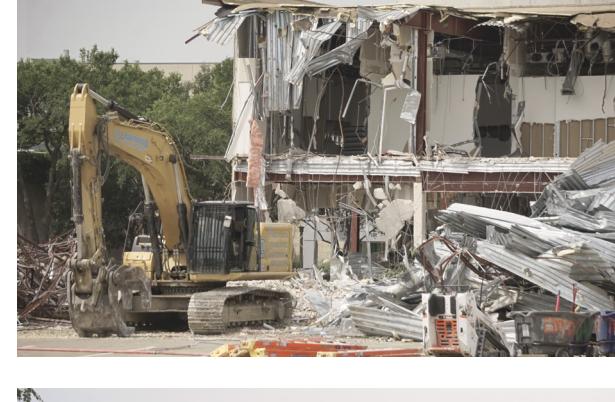
The new Student Success Center will replace the Honors Lounge and its adjacent spaces. Demolition will continue through spring

ANDRÉ AVERION
Mercury Staff

The demolition of the Cecil and Ida Green Center began April 17 and will continue until the end of the spring semester.

Originally known as the Cecil and Ida Green Center for the Study of Science and Society, the center was created in 1992 for speaker events and for cross-disciplinary research in honor of UTD founder Cecil Green and his wife, philanthropist Ida Mabelle Green.

Replacing the center, which most recently served as the home of the Hobson Wildenthal Honors College and suspended t-shirts display, will be a new 235,000 square foot student union and Student Success Center. This four-story space will include a dedicated dance practice space, an outdoor amphitheater, new restaurants, a new gaming lounge, a 360-degree lecture hall, a 12,500 square-foot ballroom and a new home for the student memorial. It will also be the new home of the Student Success Center, the Office of Undergraduate Education, the Office of Graduate Education, the Hobson Wildenthal Honors College, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and Educational Technology Services.



Demolition of the Green Center began April 17 and will continue for the rest of the semester.

SURJADITYA SARKAR | MERCURY STAFF

MAY FLOWERS MAY NOT BE THE CURE



BERYL ZHU | MERCURY STAFF

STUDYING FOR FINALS?



RACHEL WOON | MERCURY STAFF

TEST



ERIN GUTSCHKE | MERCURY STAFF

SUMMER JOB



ANN JAYAN | MERCURY STAFF

SUDOKU!

4.15 Sudoku key

6	1	2	4	5	3	9	7	8
4	5	9	1	7	8	3	6	2
8	3	7	6	2	9	1	5	4
2	4	5	9	1	6	7	8	3
9	8	1	7	3	2	5	4	6
7	6	3	8	4	5	2	9	1
5	7	4	3	8	1	6	2	9
1	9	8	2	6	7	4	3	5
3	2	6	5	9	4	8	1	7

4.29 Sudoku

			8	4				2
					7			
						1	9	
5							2	
1						7		
	7				4	5	2	
2						6	1	5
			9	6				
7	5	3				4		
		2	5	8				

LIBRARY TROUBLE



JOSHUA DAVIDSON | MERCURY STAFF

TOTALITY INSANITY



MADABUCHI OKORO | MERCURY STAFF

SIT-IN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

to prolonged encampment, the president of Columbia moved classes online for the remainder of the spring semester beginning April 23. Columbia is among 40 other universities, including MIT and UC Berkeley, that have set up occupation zones on campus in solidarity with those displaced from the war in Gaza.

"The Gaza liberation encampment [shines a] spotlight on the mass displacement in Gaza," Saad said. "Nearly 2 million Palestinians live in tents and in shelters because of indiscriminate bombing[s] without access to food, water and basic life needs."

April 23 marked 200 days since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel, which killed 1,139 people. In response, Israel invaded Gaza; the invasion has killed over 34,000 Palestinians so far, including 14,000 children, and has displaced millions within

an Israel-blockaded perimeter. Eighteen days into the conflict, Benson released a letter expressing sympathy for Israeli casualties without acknowledging casualties in Gaza, sparking a series of demonstrations and protest art and the eventual removal of the Spirit Rocks for "extended political discourse." On Feb. 27, Student Government declared support for a permanent ceasefire with resolution S.R. 2023-12; last year SG passed S.R. 2022-40, or "Divest from Militarism" and Benson said that UTD leadership did not share the same view as SG's senate shortly afterward, according to the Texas Jewish Post.

UTD's SJP, along with Palestinian solidarity organizations at Columbia, Tufts and Rutgers-New Brunswick, are joining Popular University for Gaza — week-long education programs that teach students about the war in Gaza. College students have clashed with police in riot gear at Cal Poly Humboldt and Yale. In Texas, protests have occurred at the UT

San Antonio, Texas A&M and UT Arlington, but there have been widespread arrests at UT Austin, where Abbott called in the Department of Public Safety with tactical gear despite no signs of violence. Fifty-seven UT Austin students have been arrested as well as a FOX 7 photojournalist, and all were initially charged with criminal trespassing before Travis County dropped all charges.

"The moral of the story is that if this sit-in doesn't cut it, we'll be back," Lafi said. "We're gonna continue pressure, we're gonna continue momentum until divestment, until liberation, until return. Everything we did today and everything we will do is for our families in Gaza. We're out here in solidarity with students in Columbia, with students all across the nation who are doing this ... A win at UT Dallas is a win everywhere. A win at Columbia is a win everywhere. A win is a win everywhere. So we have to be committed to keep winning."



Demonstrators wear black and white keffiyehs — traditional Palestinian shawls — carry signs calling for cease-fire while marching throughout campus.

LINELIAN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Fine Arts Multimedia at Webster University in St. Louis in 1966. It led him to his first role in education at the Ohio State University in his hometown of Columbus as an instructor with the Department of Art Education from 1970 to 1981. During his time as a professor, he later received his master's degree in 1972 and doctorate in 1981. Linehan would stay at Ohio State for several more years, ultimately introducing

computer animation into the Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design in 1987 while serving as associate director of the center and associate professor of the Department of Art Education between 1981 and 1989.

In 1989, Linehan moved to Texas, first working as associate dean for the College of Architecture at Texas A&M University until 1992, where he founded the University's Visualization Laboratory. He then moved to Houston as senior vice president of CRSS Architects Inc. — an inter-

national architecture firm where he introduced advanced computer-based visualization — until 1994 and additionally served as the Director of Information Technologies Research at the Houston Advanced Research Center until 1996.

Linehan then moved to Sarasota, Florida and became president of the Ringling School of Art and Design. During his tenure from 1996 to 1999, he directed several programs that resulted in enrollment increases, administrative reform and campus expansions. Additionally, he devel-

MADRIGUERA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

"I wanted to develop that at UTD."

Madriguera was first inspired by music in junior high school when he witnessed the performance of Spanish classical music virtuoso Andrés Segovia, the first Marquis of Salobreña. This fascination with music shaped the young Connecticut man, who went on to obtain scholarships from Spain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to study the Andrés Segovia Master Classes in Santiago de Compostela, Spain from 1971-72, before going on to graduate from the prestigious Madrid Royal Conservatory.

After returning to the U.S., he was welcomed to UTD as a Music and Humanities faculty chair in guitar studies in 1980, where he received a touring grant from the Texas Commission on the Arts as a solo performer from 1982 to 1984.

Upon returning from his first series of tours, Madriguera received a master's degree in humanities from UTD in 1984 while maintaining his role as faculty chair. Between 1984 and 1987, Madriguera would travel again, spending three years in Columbia with a Fulbright scholarship from the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars to teach classical guitar.

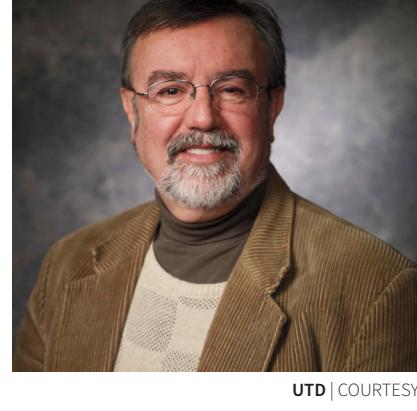
In 1993, Madriguera received his doctorate degree in humanities from UTD and became the Director of Guitar Studies, quickly earning an international name for himself. In this position, Madriguera was invited to teach and perform in Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Vietnam, Australia, Mexico, Greece and Spain, traveling in the latter as a duo act with his wife Sabine Rabe. Most notably among these visits, Madriguera served with the U.S. Embassy

in Ecuador in 2007 and was a panel judge at the Darwin International Guitar Festival in Australia in 2002.

In 2000, Madriguera co-founded and became Artistic Director of the UTD Guitar Series and the Annual Texas Guitar Competition and Festival at UTD, both of which have been cultural staples on campus and attractions for international talents.

Madriguera's presence not only impacted UTD but was felt across the DFW community. From 1992 to 1995, he organized a program with the Kraft General Foods Foundation to pour \$24,000 into Dallas, Garland and Mesquite public school music programs. Madriguera also became Chair of Education and Culture to the State Executive Board of Partners of the Americas in 2002, co-produced the 2003 Mesquite Guitar Festival and founded and directed the Collegiate Competition and Festival at Eastfield College in 2005 until his passing.

A memorial mass was held April 17 at St. Joseph Catholic Church, and a remembrance of his legacy was held on campus at the Jonson Performance Hall April 18. His funeral was arranged by the Sparkman-Hillcrest Funeral Home.



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'Inspiring,' 'resilient,' 'compassionate'

Renowned speech writer from the Obama era shares story of reconnecting with Jewish values

JACK SIERPUTOWSKI
Managing Editor

ARDRA TRIVEDI
Mercury Staff

"Four thousand years of wisdom from my ancestors" — this is what Sarah Hurwitz, renowned speechwriter and author, gained from reconnecting with her Jewish roots, discussing theology, activism and much more at Hillel's Teach-In event April 16.

UTD hosted the talk from Hurwitz as a part of a speech tour with Hillel International, a campus organization that supports students as they "continue to develop their Jewish identity" during college, according to their website. At the event, Hurwitz discussed her time as a staff writer, her relationship with Judaism, antisemitism on college campuses and her engagement with student activism. Hurwitz began her political career in 1998 as an intern in Vice President Al Gore's speechwriting office. She began writing for Barack Obama's 2008 campaign for president, and after his election, later shifted to writing for First Lady Michelle Obama.

Jade Steinberg, computer science freshman and president of UTD Hillel, said they met Hurwitz by chance while on a trip to Atlanta, Georgia. At Hillel International's Israel Summit in February, Hurwitz helped Steinberg draft their speech to present at UTD Student Government's cease-fire resolution public meeting.

"Before I even met her, I was deeply inspired," Steinberg said. "Seeing the way that she could talk about rampant antisemitism, but not in a combative way. She was compassionate about it ... I have been looking for a way to find that mutual compassion to have these dialogues."

Hurwitz said that when she was growing up, she was uninvested in Judaism — her experience with the faith amounted to "two excruciating services a year at the High Holidays." For much of her life, Hurwitz said she identified as a "cultural Jew" — even though she really knew nothing about the culture. Then, after feeling lonely and bored from a breakup in her 30s, she enrolled in an Intro to Judaism class at a local community center. After reconnecting with her roots, Hurwitz published

her novel "Here All Along" in 2019, which explores theology, ethics and values, connecting readers with the "radical transformative tradition" of Jewish wisdom but in a conversational tone.

"I signed up [for the class] just to fill time, but what I found absolutely blew me away," Hurwitz said. "It was four thousand years of wisdom from my ancestors, wisdom about how to be a good person and how to lead a good life and how to find profound spiritual connection."

Hurwitz said she rediscovered the central theme of Judaism, which is that all humans are "created in the image of God." This is drawn from Genesis in the Torah, often quoted in brief as "bitzlelem Elohim," meaning in the image of God. According to Hurwitz, this concept represents that all humans are truly equal. While many of us claim to believe this, Hurwitz said we often fail to live up to this ideal, viewing people differently based on how famous or how rich they are. Hurwitz views the "in the image idea" as profoundly radical, that truly honoring it would require restructuring society and that our failure to honor it is linked to many social problems.

"Every single person is infinitely worthy — you cannot put a price on a human life," Hurwitz said. "No one is more valuable than anyone else, there is no one like each one of us on the planet, and we're irreplaceable."

The values Hurwitz discovered through the Jewish faith translate directly into her philanthropic ventures, including educating college students about making a more meaningful life and volunteering in hospitals as a chaplain. In her time as a chaplain in the oncology ward, Hurwitz said she tried to give courage to others as they walked a thin line between life and death, a concept in Judaism called "thin spaces." Hurwitz said she saw many patients who were satisfied with their life's course and wanted to die, a desire not always understood by their loved ones. Hurwitz gained a deeper understanding of the Jewish faith by empathizing and validating patients' feelings about death rather than judging them.

"The secular world tells us to run like hell from thin

SEE HURWITZ, PAGE 7

A diligent drummer's double life

Torched drummer Bradley Johnson pursues both his academic and indie rock star dreams

PAOLA MARTINEZ
Mercury Staff



RORY MOORE | MERCURY STAFF

By day, this computer science student chases the finish line of graduation. By night, he is the mysterious drummer energizing the crowd from the back of the stage as part of the new local alt-indie-emo rock band that underground music fans at UTD have heard so much about.

Bradley Johnson is the drummer for the band Torched, joining the group in summer 2023 after years of playing drums and being in and out of various bands. Moonlighting as a rockstar allows Johnson to develop his passions through live shows, creative music videos and singles all while maintaining his daytime routine as a student.

Torched, originally from Denton and formed in 2021, is a four-member band composed of guitarist and vocalist Grayson Aron, guitarist Nick Giles, bassist Logan Ramsey and Johnson, the drummer. Before joining Torched, Johnson was in several bands

both in and outside of school. In high school, he was part of his school's classic rock cover band, jazz band, marching and orchestra bands and as a UTD student he joined Strings Attached Music Club and started a Muse cover band with some of the members. Other bands included rock band Pax Americana and a thrash metal band he left in December 2022.

"A joke [among] drummers is that drummers are always in three or four bands at a time because no one can find drummers, and no one wants to move all the drums around," Johnson said.

Johnson joined Torched last summer after Ramsey, his longtime friend, reached out to him and asked him to join.

"I didn't know about them previously, but they came over and we jammed [to] songs," Johnson said. "It was perfect synergy, everyone got along well, so it was great."

SEE DRUMMER, PAGE 7



AHMAD KHOSHNAI | COURTESY

A Comet's guide to summertime film fun

MIA NGUYEN
Mercury Staff

While some movies are year-round favorites, the arrival of sweltering weather and mosquito hordes evokes a desire for media that can provide an escape from arguably the worst season of the year, filled with pit stains and bug bites. So, slather on your sunscreen, throw on a crop top and prep for the summer with some films that can provide an early vacation and a romanticized image of a terrible season.

1.) Little Miss Sunshine

This tragicomedy follows a dysfunctional family as they embark on a lengthy and tumultuous road trip in an old van to take the youngest family member, Olive, to a beauty pageant. While Olive's drive to win the Little Miss Sunshine Contest is admirable, the family members' sanity is put to the test as they navigate conflicting personalities and absurd incidents that arise from the trip. The strange and endearing cast is portrayed by experts in quirky characters such as Steve Carell, Toni Collette and Paul Dano.

Everyone has been crammed into a vehicle with their family during a road trip with headaches and gas station stops aplenty, and this film encapsulates this roller coaster of emotions with a charming cast and simple storyline. Simultaneously a tearjerker — hitting on themes of body image and suicide — and an antidepressant showing the beauty in peculiarity, this film is a perfect representation of the good and bad of vacationing.

2.) I Know What You Did Last Summer (1997)

Nothing screams summer movie like a good old '90s slasher. Inane and hot characters race away from



SEE SUMMER, PAGE 7

'When L.R. Wept' admitted into IMPACTE! film festival

Prestigious Catalonian film festival screens UTD Ph.D. student Ahmad Khoshnati's short film

PAOLA MARTINEZ
Mercury Staff

The short animated film "When L.R. Wept" by Ahmad Khoshnati, a visual and performing arts Ph.D. student, was accepted into the IMPACTE! Film Festival in Catalonia, Spain. IMPACTE! is a film festival focused on human rights issues, receiving over 750 submissions annually, of which 30 are selected and only three receive awards. Khoshnati shared his filming process and artistic vision with *The Mercury*, hoping his film will challenge viewers' perception of war.

Although getting accepted into a film festival is a small indie producer's dream, Khoshnati said this isn't the first time his films have been accepted into film festivals. He started making films as an independent artist in 2016 and his very first, a stop-motion called "Unjust Matches," was accepted into a film festival in Spain. Khoshnati's previous wins have not dulled the thrill of making it into festivals, however, and he felt the same joy and accomplishment with "When L.R. Wept."

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AUSTRALIAN DUO ROYEL OTIS REPS INDIE ROCK

The indie rock duo Royel Otis makes first stop in U.S. tour at the Pavilion Toyota Music Factory, electrifies the metroplex

MIA NGUYEN
Mercury Staff

Royel Otis' addictive vocals and electrifying instrumentals quickly made their way onto the playlists of indie and alternative rock fans with their viral cover of "Murder on the Dancefloor." And with the arrival of their debut studio album "Pratts and Pain" and their first U.S. tour stop at The Pavilion at Toyota Music Factory on April 20, the Australian duo "won't settle down" any time soon.

Although known for subdued charisma in their music videos and live performances, Royel Otis were quick to share boisterous chuckles and endearing jokes in their conversation with *The Mercury*. Lead vocalist Otis Pavlovic and guitarist Royel Maddell began their tour in a lineup of bands along with Blue October, lovelytheband and The Unlikely Candidates.

"If you want to feel like you're welcomed in [a new place], playing a show does that," Pavlovic said. "Afterwards, not at the start. You're not sure if you're gonna get something thrown at you, but [performing in a new state] does help you feel welcomed."

The band renews the indie genre with seemingly effortless vocals and atmospheric guitar riffs, describing their music euphoric, like looking out the car window on road trips. While a joy to blast through car speakers, Royel Otis is at their peak on stage.

"I love playing 'Heading For The Door' because it's the song that I sing the least in, and I can just focus on playing guitar," Maddell said. "And I always fuck up the guitar lead line, and I like the challenge of trying to move around the stage and get that delicate guitar line right."

The band began their set with "Sonic Blue" in a flood of electric blue strobing lights. Despite Royel Otis's strong musicality, their stage presence is gentle, allowing the audience to enjoy their unique beats and catchy lyrics without unnecessary flare. Pavlovic joked that this sense of calm is a coping mechanism, and their seemingly mellow nature comes from the pressure of performances.

"Otis seems chill most of the time, which makes me feel like a madman, I



ALL PHOTOS: MIA NGUYEN | MERCURY STAFF

Australian indie rock duo Royel Otis consists of lead vocalist Otis Pavlovic and guitarist Royel Maddell. They kicked off their first U.S. tour stop at The Pavilion Toyota Music Factory alongside Blue October, lovelytheband and The Unlikely Candidates.

throw up before every show," Maddell said. "People say 'oh, really? Because you look so confident on stage.' But no, that's nerves. I'm wigging out, pacing around the stage. That's not because I'm performing. I'm pacing because I'm just terrified to be there."

Because of time restraints and heavy rain the night of April 20, the duo did not get to venture around Dallas, but they did

partake in one Texas concert tradition: donning cowboy hats. Maddell wore a red cowboy hat with shimmery ribbons and Pavlovic a black hat with sequined stars. As the hats found their way to the stage, Maddell chirped, "Oh, shit, we got hats!" The duo wore them through their high-energy performances of "Heading For The Door" and "Going Kokomo."

"As a kid, I loved cowboy films," Pav-

lovic said. "And so when I was young, like ten, I wanted to move to Texas and live on a horse ranch."

Throughout the set, the group's introverted charm was palpable, from Pavlovic's modest rhythmic arm movements to Maddell's faded red hair covering his face throughout the show, just like in their other performances. Their album and EP covers either feature Maddell with his face

covered or leave out the two faces completely. Pavlovic said he has mixed feelings about being the more public-facing member of the duo.

"I kind of always wanted to ... be a band that doesn't really show our faces," Pavlovic said. "But we always have artworks for the covers and things that kind of mask, but I ended up just always being [more visible]. I've kind of gotten better at it, but it's weird."

Since the release of their first three EPs, Pavlovic said their sound and tone have shifted dramatically from the calmer energy of their previous work. They attribute this change to the ever-changing influence of collaborators, environment and emotions when making music. While the duo, along with their keyboardist and drummer, played an array of songs from their debut album, their older fan favorites such as "Oysters in My Pocket" and "Going Kokomo" made their way onto the setlist.

"You adopt or inherit some of the environment around [you]," Maddell said. "The stuff we did record in Byron Bay, I think it does sound more beachy. And this stuff we recorded in South London, it sounds a bit darker and a bit more bleak because it was winter at the time, so it's not an intentional thing. I think it just comes out, but we try to have fun in the studio nonetheless."

Royel Otis' setlist ended with their iconic cover of "Murder on the Dancefloor," previously featured on the "Like a Version" segment on Australian radio station Triple J. While this single caused their rise in popularity, the duo never planned on performing covers, feeling more confident playing their original songs.

"I love other people's music," Pavlovic said. "But in my head, because we were talking about this earlier, we never really wanted to do covers. That was never the plan, but obviously, 'Like a Version,' you have to do it. But it wasn't our music, it was a cover. But you can't be too upset about those kinds of things."

Royel Otis will return to Denton on May 9 to perform a full set at the Rubber Gloves Rehearsal Studio.

HURWITZ
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spaces, we cannot stand death, hurt, illness," Hurwitz said. "Jewish tradition tells us ... you run like hell right into those thin spaces."

Melissa Friedensohn, executive director for Hillels of North Texas, said that Hurwitz's volunteering is an inspiration, along with her personality, warmth and approachability. Friedensohn said she thinks that students can benefit from Hurwitz's life story of always bouncing back and persisting in her career of speechwriting despite failures.

"That type of resilience resonated with all students and community members in the audience about what failure can teach us," Friedensohn said.

Hurwitz said that what she calls the recent increase in antisemitism on college campuses shocked her, as well as the binary thinking shown through some students who view Israel as on the level of the KKK or the Nazi party. She said she spoke with many students who felt uncomfortable on campuses due to their Jewish identity and the backlash against Zionism, which has increasingly become a buzzword associated with 'evil.' She said she feels that while many countries have done wrong, Israel is held to a double standard in that Jews who support it are criticized for identifying with it in any capacity.

Hurwitz views this as a modern conversion demand; this refers to the tendency of Western cultures to demand that Jews assimilate and give up aspects of their identity

so they can be seen as more tolerable. According to an article by Jerome Friedman, forced conversion to Christianity has been practiced in many countries across Europe, including Spain, Germany and Italy, and it has been such an intense issue that crypto-Jews, Jewish people that hid their background to avoid persecution, became a common phenomena in Europe.

"It's wrong for students to be policing minority students' identities," Hurwitz said. "It's wrong for people to be harassing minority students for their viewpoints or their identities or their backgrounds. So whatever label we want to give it ... bullying's not okay."

Hurwitz said she thinks it is important for Jewish students to give themselves a break and disengage from combative people where necessary. She encourages Jewish students to be open to accepting the invitation to discuss these issues with others, provided they are kind and respectful. Friedensohn said she hoped that the immersion in Jewish culture brought by the talk could be a "strengthening experience" to any students who feel uneasy at the current political climate. Overall, Hurwitz recommended that Jewish students focus on groups inclusive to all and that they take pride in the long history of Jewish resilience.

"You are a part of this four thousand year tradition," Hurwitz said. "That is so unbelievably extraordinary. I mean, the wisdom that we've generated, the incredible people that we've produced. The fact that we are still here ... I think there's a reason for that. And that's something to be incredibly proud of."

the protagonists wears a yellow rain slicker and a hook for a hand, resulting in a campy and ridiculous antagonist.

3.) Triangle of Sadness

While everyone wishes they could jet off on a lavish international vacation, the reality of summer break can be hours of internship work, verbal abuse from customers at your part-time job or struggling through summer courses. In "Triangle of Sadness," those worries are unfathomable for models Carl and Yaya, who vacation on a luxury cruise ship with other wealthy, out-of-touch individuals. The trip takes an unexpected turn when the ship suddenly sinks, leaving its crew and pampered guests stuck on a seemingly inhabitable island — making your packed summer schedule feel

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Ramsey said the first practices with Johnson as an added bandmate were special. Although Ramsey and Johnson played together in the school's jazz band, Ramsey said they didn't jam out together or bond over music like they do now.

"It was really crazy how fast we locked in," Ramsey said. "Grayson and Nick were able to lock in through us. It felt like it came together very naturally."

As Johnson completed his last semester at UTD, Torched recorded their newly-released single "Grip." He said filming the music video for the single took several hours.

"We pulled an all-nighter, and we recorded a kickass music video, and it was a lot of fun," Johnson said.

Johnson had always wanted to play the drums, but when he was younger, he couldn't buy them because of their bulky size and weight, making them difficult to store and travel with. He initially started playing guitar when he was younger after his older sister picked up the instrument. Johnson got a papa jam drum set, starting his career with the drums.

"That's how I started learning drums, tapping it with my fingers," Johnson said. "That's how I started, and I loved it."

Johnson graduated from his paper jams drum set to an actual drum set and won free lessons for drumming in fifth-grade raffle. Johnson said that a mentor is great for beginners to learn basic techniques, but now that he is comfortable with drumming, he likes to imitate the way his favorite drummers play. He takes inspiration from progressive metal, pro-



RORY MOORE | MERCURY STAFF

gressive rock and hardcore punk drumming.

"One of my favorites is Gavin Harrison," Johnson said. "I love how he's also trained in jazz, and you can tell by the way he plays. He has really great groove, and he doesn't overplay songs, but he still adds an extra touch."

Michael Hernandez, associate director of bands and percussion coordinator for Plano High School, has been Johnson's mentor since Johnson was a fifth grader. Hernandez said he's known Johnson for 10 years and has seen him grow into a talented musician.

"While right now he's rightfully getting recognized for his drum set playing, don't let that fool you," Hernandez said. "He's a very well-versed percussionist and can play almost all the instruments at an expert level. He is quite gifted."

Alongside drumming, Johnson also enjoys coding as a hobby, having programmed games in Roblox during his childhood. Johnson said he has always loved technology and music, but when deciding a major for college, he had to choose the option that made the most financial sense.

"The nice thing about tech — I'm doing software engineering work — [is that work-life] balance is great and it pays well," Johnson said. "It gives me the opportunity to focus on music while having the financial means to support that. Because music is really expensive."

Torched will open for alternative rock band Boys of Fall alongside rock band Greywind and alternative/indie band Good Terms on April 30 at Three Links in Deep Ellum. The band can be found on YouTube and Instagram @TorchedTx and by searching "Torched" on Spotify.

Torched has so far focused on live performances, but Johnson said that after graduation, he and the band will have more free time to do even more shows, record more songs and potentially release an EP.

"We're up and coming," Johnson said. "We have a new single that's hopefully going to drop soon, and other than that, over the summer we're looking to kick up the recording, but no guarantee on release date."

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a killer whose costume and motives are too corny to actually strike fear into the viewer's heart, resulting in the perfect watch for summertime hangouts with friends. This film is no different, following four friends who return to their hometown after receiving a letter from an anonymous source claiming to know about their accidental murder of a fisherman.

While critics despise this horror film because of its supposed inferiority to "Scream," which was released the year prior, the laughable plot and cliche horror movie sequences make this film an entertaining watch. And of course, since the movie is set in New England, the killer who threatens

the protagonists wears a yellow rain slicker and a hook for a hand, resulting in a campy and ridiculous antagonist.

3.) Triangle of Sadness

While everyone wishes they could jet off on a lavish international vacation, the reality of summer break can be hours of internship work, verbal abuse from customers at your part-time job or struggling through summer courses. In "Triangle of Sadness," those worries are unfathomable for models Carl and Yaya, who vacation on a luxury cruise ship with other wealthy, out-of-touch individuals. The trip takes an unexpected turn when the ship suddenly sinks, leaving its crew and pampered guests stuck on a seemingly inhabitable island — making your packed summer schedule feel

blissful in comparison.

This hilarious satire shows the stark differences in social class through off-putting humor and visually engaging scenes that scream old money. The characters are absurd and the theme is incredibly on the nose, but this exaggeration works in the film's favor, making it an entertaining adventure that encourages you to hate on the rich.

4.) Mid90s

The summers of our childhoods were simultaneously blissful and angst-filled times, and "Mid90s" is a bittersweet coming-of-age film that will transport viewers back to their early teenage years. Sweet 13-year-old Stevie finds himself in a hurry to grow up in the midst of skating culture in '90s

Los Angeles. The ragtag team of older teen skateboarders he befriends expose the boy to summer adventures spent at the skatepark filled with pain, angst and excitement.

This film is Jonah Hill's directorial debut, and in his dedication to authenticity, he casted boys plucked straight from the skate parks of Los Angeles. By casting skaters, the characters feel personable and real. Their passion for skating is visceral, and every actor is able to draw fits of laughter and tears from viewers through Hill's signature vulgar humor and simplistic dialogue.

5.) The Virgin Suicides

Another reason for summer's inferiority is not being able to see class crushes as often. The infatuation that comes from the mystery of crushing on someone you don't

know is exciting and breaks up the monotony of classes, but is it healthy? Queen of the female gaze, director Sofia Coppola portrays the dark effects of romantic obsession through the hyper feminine and summery aesthetic of "The Virgin Suicides." The film follows the elusive and ethereal Lisbon sisters, whose deaths continue to haunt the neighborhood boys who obsessed over them in life.

The cinematography of this film focuses on a dreamy and surreal depiction of suburbia, contrasting the solemn subject matter with muted pastels and distinctly girlish imagery of flora and dainty outfits. This feast for the eyes makes viewers understand the unspoken suffering of adolescent girls in Coppola's best work yet.

XAI Reprom Wonderland Royale



Pictured from left to right are Tanvi Panda, Monarch of Spades; Frankie Emmanuel, Monarch of Clubs; and Tanya Pandi, Monarch of Hearts. Per event policy, the Monarch of Diamonds was removed from this photo.

KAVYA RACHEETI
Mercury Staff

RAINIER PEDERSON
Mercury Staff

Inflatable ruby-red dice bounce through the air as impassioned prom-goers dance, laugh and swap stories. The sharp pulse of a beat reverberates through the Visitor Center's Atrium at Chi Alpha Iota Diaternity's 2024 "Reprom" as chapter members celebrate the winners of the "Wonderland Royale" themed royalty elections — a Monarch of Hearts, Monarch of Clubs, Monarch of Diamonds and Monarch of Spades, each adorned with a crown of cards.

XAI is UTD's only diaternity, meaning anyone can join regardless of gender, and it serves as a Greek life organization that emphasizes inclusivity for LGBTQ students with events such as drag shows and an annual Reprom in the spring. Staying true to the conventions of high school prom, XAI offers the excitement of a traditional prom court with its own twist: the titles of prom monarch and nominations are open to anyone, even those outside the organization.

The "Wonderland Royale" theme permeated every part of the event in the Visitor's Center. A rectangular table full of snacks and water connected to a group of circular tables covered in playing cards, which were progressively scattered as the night went on and people used them to play games like go-fish. The dance floor was sectioned off from the rest of the atrium by pride flags, giving attendees the opportunity to take pictures with their favorite flags while providing a barrier between the activity of the dance floor and the games at the tables. Dancers on the floor fought to keep inflatable dice and balloons in the air while the DJs from Radio UTD filled the hall with music from atop their flower-covered table. A photo booth with roses and cards allowed attendees to take themed photos with the variety of props provided.

Comets wore elaborate outfits, with a plethora of dresses and suits in various hues across the dance floor. Some went all out with the theme of royal elegance by covering themselves head to toe in an elaborate gilded dress. Dancers — including Tanvi Panda, biochemistry junior and this year's Monarch of Spades — leaned into the Wonderland theme by wearing cat ears alongside blue, purple and pink outfits as a reference to the famous Cheshire cat.



"I decided to go all out for this," Tanvi said. "I had to dye everything myself."

Tanvi's pink outfit was hand dyed, and they borrowed their blue cat ears, which matched the blue fur lining atop a black coat, from a friend. Their cat eye eyeliner and white-red gradient eyeshadow was done by Tanya Panda, their sibling and Monarch of Hearts.

Many stuck with red or achromatic outfits, like business sophomore and Monarch of Clubs Frankie Emmanuel. Their use of red and black echoed the classic motifs of playing cards. While the outfits varied in artistic expression, Reprom gave every attendee the opportunity to reflect on their growth and new openness in contrast to who they may have been in high school.

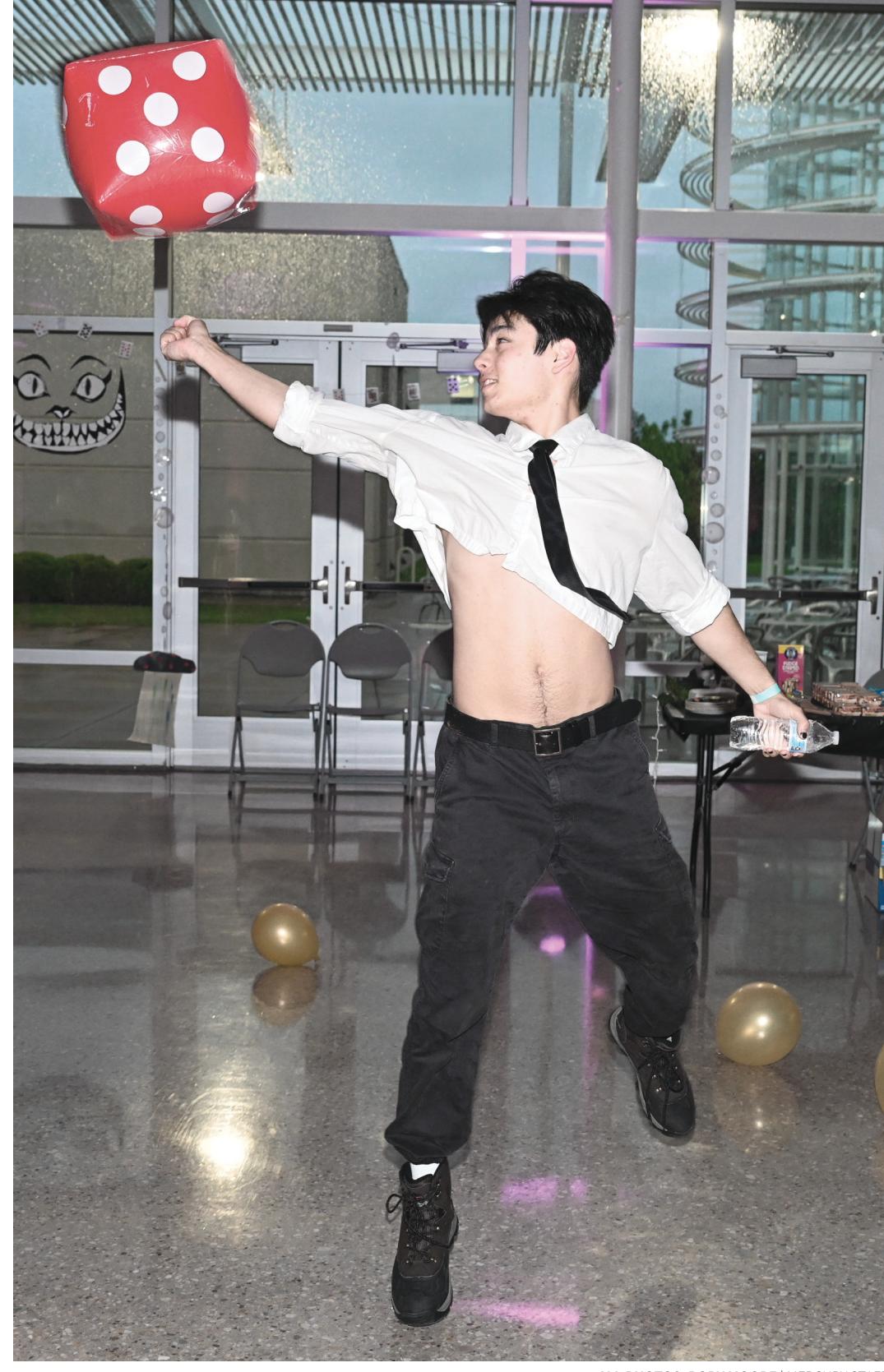
"This [outfit] was my prom dress. I have just evolved my style a bit since then, so I added more, including accessories I made," Emmanuel said.

For some, Reprom was the prom they never had and a new chance to experience memories they may have missed out on. For others, Reprom is a replacement for a



◀ Reprom allowed attendees to relive missed high-school experiences.

▼ Reprom attendees danced, socialized and exchanged stories.



ALL PHOTOS: RORY MOORE | MERCURY STAFF

not-so-great high school experience.

"I went to prom in high school," said Matthew Parrish, a visual and performing arts sophomore. "It was just a bunch of high schoolers cramming in a room and being the loudest, most jerky people on the planet. This time, we have room."

Reprom also allowed fellow attendees to reconsider what the conventions of school dances meant to them — particularly for those who attended less accepting schools and weren't out of the closet. Reprom defied high school prom's typical heteronormativity with a variety of pride flags and four gender-neutral royalty titles instead of Prom King and Queen.

"I usually didn't really care much for high school dances because they were very heteronormative," Tanvi said.

Reprom also allowed students to explore their deep bonds. While the title of Monarch of Hearts might suggest fluffy romance, Tanya said they found a deeper meaning to it, especially since they attended Reprom with their ex and now friend Jade who they have known since

childhood.

"We tried the couple thing after high school. It did not work. But [we're] still really great friends," Tanya said.

As the night went on, attendees exchanged stories of how they came into themselves and how they've grown as people since high school.

"Being in XAI and being a sibling has really helped me like come into my own and really be more outward and passionate about myself as a person," Davy Romine, computer science senior and XAI Vice President, said.

Even if they weren't affiliated with XAI, attendees said they were grateful to have a space like Reprom to be their authentic selves.

"I just think that queer spaces are so important because that's a lot of what helped me figure myself out and a lot of what helped me figure out how to be comfortable in my own skin," Tanvi said. "I think that every person deserves that space for themselves, so I'm really glad I found this community at UTD."

WEPT

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acceptance.

"When you're a student and when your artwork is selected in a festival, it will be very great," Khoshnati said. "I really got motivated to work more as an independent artist."

"When L.R. Wept" tells the story of the fallen angel Lucifer carelessly annihilating everything in his path, only for him to come to his senses at the end and realize how he has ruined the world. Lucifer is the agent of war — the origin of cruelty depicted in the film. Khoshnati said he was inspired to make this film after seeing footage and photographs depicting war and its effects on children.

"I made a decision to show the main agents of war, the wars of the world, and that's why I started thinking about the fall of angels," Khoshnati said. "From that moment, I started thinking about the creation of oppression."

Khoshnati said it took him anywhere from four to four and a half months to complete the film, where he is credited as the writer, producer and director. The project was completed in July 2022, a month prior to when Khoshnati received his admission to UTD. Working by himself poses the challenge of handling every aspect of the creation process, but Khoshnati said he doesn't mind it, as he's gotten better at managing the responsibilities.

"You have control over everything," Khoshnati said. "But at the end, I think that's the amount of satisfaction that you achieve as a result of doing



AHMAD KHOSHNIAT | COURTESY

Khoshnati's "When L.R. Wept" is intended to metaphorically explore the effects of war and the ramifications it has for particular groups like children. Khosnati specifically wants the audience to question themselves.

this artwork and doing all of these activities."

Sourcing his animation films is an important aspect for Khoshnati's filmmaking process. Sourcing includes taking videos of how the body moves to add to his drawings in the animation software he uses. Khoshnati said other filmmakers find inspiration from sources like YouTube videos, but cautions fellow filmmakers not to dwell on production and to just create.

"I like these challenging parts of short films," Khoshnati said. "When you have to tell your audiences the main message during a short period of time, I always enjoy experiencing this process."

have new ideas so you can add them to your project, but it's important that you start working."

Short films are Khoshnati's specialty despite the medium's challenges. Khoshnati said short films force him to prioritize the content he includes. Making animated short films has allowed him to express himself in different ways and create his own artistic signature.

"I like these challenging parts of short films," Khoshnati said. "When you have to tell your audiences the main message during a short period of time, I always enjoy experiencing this process."

Khoshnati said "When L.R. Wept" is an experimental film that goes against mainstream films criteria. Focusing on the process of editing the film, Khoshnati made continuous cuts between scenes and changed the color mood of the shots between these cuts to relate to the film's subject of war.

"When the audience is watching the film, it seems as if those continuous cuts are annoying [or] odd," Khoshnati said. "They are. Those cuts are annoying their eyes since that's like shooting a gun."

He reassured viewers that there is no such nothing as a wrong answer when interpreting his film.

"There are some key elements that motivate audiences to mull over, to speculate about something," Khoshnati said. "They will have questions as a result of watching those things that are happening in the screen in front of them."

The trailer for the short film depicts a red splat falling from the sky and sprouting a black figure. The black figure lets out a grave scream up to the sky before the screen goes dark and the credits roll.

"Finally, at the end, Lucifer himself is shocked as a result of watching all of these destructions that have happened," Khoshnati said. "He gets shot and starts dying."

The synopsis for his short film is vague and doesn't give away too much. Khoshnati hopes that "When L.R. Wept" elicits questions from the audience about war and its effects, specifically on children, in the hopes of motivating audiences to create change.

Intramurals celebrates the blunders and brilliance of UTD Chess Team



The Chess Team rounds out an eventful year with victories in the Pan-American Championship, Southwest Collegiate and Texas intercollegiate chess tournaments.

UTD CHESS TEAM | COURTESY

AAFIYA ASLAM
Mercury Staff

UTD Chess celebrated the end of an eventful season by playing in the Intramurals, its last tournament of the semester, against fellow Comets in the Founders Atrium April 20.

The Intramurals is a UTD affiliated 7-round Swiss tournament with 5-minute time controls and 3-second increments per move. Koustav Chatterjee, Andrei Macovei and Ivan Schitco competed among 46 total participants and emerged as first, second and third-place winners, respectively. The organizers gave prizes to the top U2200, U1800, U1400 and U1000 players — respectively won by Barrett Winchell, Abdullah Akbar, Nathan Vaz and Bhanu Prakash Bangaru. This tournament aimed to bring the entire chess team together and highlight the accomplishments that UTD Chess has reached throughout the past academic year. Several significant tournaments received acknowledgements,

such as the Chess Collegiate League for fall 2023 and spring 2024, where all the teams qualified for the playoffs in both semesters. Although the team started the season off rough, it has climbed the ranks with memorable victories in the Pan Ams and Southwest Collegiate of 2024.

Akbar, an applied cognition and neuroscience graduate student, said that this Intramurals tournament was an improvement compared to the four other Intramurals he previously participated in, as it progressed a lot faster. Akbar said his studying and playing chess finally paid off, as this was his first time winning an Intramurals prize. His favorite game was the final game he played, as it determined who would win the top prize in the U1800 section. Akbar said he usually centralizes his pawns and develops his pieces starting with knights to have a solid game. This strategy allowed him a tactical play, giving him an early advantage when his opponent blundered his bishop.

"I took lot of positional advantages and had some very interesting tactics [where] I actually skipped a fork to get a better advantage and then took the fork later [and another] fork," Akbar said.

The Chess Collegiate League is an online tournament where UTD chess players participate in weekly blitz games with a team. There are divisions to rank each team by their ELO rating as well as subdivision A and subdivision B to split the teams. If a team qualifies in the top four, they are eligible for playoffs, which determine first, second, third and fourth overall for their respective divisions. There were seven UTD teams that played in fall 2023, and all qualified for the playoffs with Teams A and F in second, Team C in third and Team G getting fourth. In spring 2024, no team placed, but all qualified for playoffs. Economics sophomore Louis-Alexandre Calvary became the competitive team's manager — a new position in UTD Chess — to help organize and train competitors in upcoming

tournaments.

"I think we can try to focus more on opening preparation specific to our opponents, try to be a little prepared before the matches," Calvary said.

In fall 2023, the team started off on the wrong foot with the Super Finals Collegiate, as it placed fourth and fifth out of six competing teams. However, the team rebounded with the Pan Ams in spring 2024 and the Southwest Collegiate Tournament. In the Pan Ams, the Chess Team placed second and sixth overall, and the Chess Club placed third, sixth and 18th in the under 1800 ELO rating section. For the Southwest Collegiate, the Chess Team placed second overall and was awarded top women's team. Chess team coach Julio Sadorra said this was a good season overall, and the team hopes to improve further without dwelling on results.

"You don't think about the results, you actually think about the habits and the process and what it takes, what it re-

quires for you to get that result," Sadorra said. "I know it's difficult, [but I'm] still proud of the effort. The effort that we use is going to be rewarded tenfold."

Despite enduring failures, the team has emphasized that they will continue to improve for the next season. The Chess Club will continue to host competitive tournaments, such as the monthly Friday blitz tournaments that took place this semester. Chess team members will continue to lecture about their games, play in simul with the rest of the team members and play blindfold chess. The president of the Chess Club, mechanical engineering junior Ben Jeffery, emphasized their improvement compared to previous seasons.

"It's been a fantastic year for UTD Chess and especially for the club," Jeffery said. "Not only did the team have great successes, but the club — it's the first time we've ever sent three teams to Pan Ams, so that was a huge success. Looking forward to seeing what's next."



UTD ATHLETICS | COURTESY

Comets blaze past opponents as they enter finals

UTD women's tennis advances to finals after a series of semifinal triumphs

AARAV DEV
Mercury Staff

The UTD women's tennis team crushed Hardin-Simmons 8-1 on April 12 before repeating the feat two days later. They ended the regular season with another win at East Texas Baptist 7-2 on April 19, followed by a victory against LeTourneau on April 26 in the ASC semifinals to advance to the finals.

Against HSU, the Comets started the day's play by taking all three doubles matches. They continued to take all but one singles match, the lone loss coming by player retirement. Freshman Riya Matharoo and junior Elyssa Ducret played perfect sets, not dropping a single game. No UTD player needed a third set to win.

"I think as a team we are in a really good mindset," freshman Reika Nagai said. "Every doubles team has really good chemistry and we've been doing

well in singles as well."

The Comets started off strong again versus Concordia, winning every doubles matchup. They also duplicated their singles efforts, losing just one match of the six. Ducret and Megan Zeng posted flawless victories.

The Comets had another successful performance in Marshall against ETBU. They won two of three doubles matchups before winning all but one singles match. Elisha Valluru, Saumya Vedula, and Nagai all had impressive victories, winning in two sets and not conceding more than three games in any set.

The Comets qualified for the ASC semifinals, where they handily defeated LeTourneau 5-0. They easily swept the three doubles matchups, before quickly wrapping up the day by winning the first two singles matches to gain the five points needed to win the match. Vedula and Ducret were the singles vic-

tors, each winning by large margins.

Nagai said that the upperclassmen in the team provide helpful guidance and motivation, and are a big part of the chemistry and success the team has been having recently.

Matharoo, Zeng and Ducret each had their eighth singles win of the season during the four game stretch. Ducret and Zeng improved to 8-4 in doubles and Valluru and Jhastine Red Ballardo go to 7-3.

The Comets now look forward to extending their five match win streak in the ASC finals April 27. They also hope to qualify and perform well in the NCAA regionals tournament that follows.

"We've been winning for four years in a row, and then people do expect us to win every time," Nagai said. "If we keep the right mentality, that'll lead us to eventually being the champion."

Comets drop to second place

Loss against Concordia, East Texas drops UTD's rank

AARAV DEV
Mercury Staff

The UTD men's tennis team defeated Hardin-Simmons 7-2 on April 13, before losing their match against Concordia Texas 4-5 on April 14 and losing again against East Texas Baptist 4-5 a week later. Their final overall record is now 6-6, falling to second in the ASC East standings.

Against HSU, the Comets were slow out of the gate, falling in two of the three doubles matches. However, they bounced back by winning all six singles matchups. All but one match were settled in just two sets.

"We're super strong in singles right now," sophomore Snehin Yerragudi said. "Our doubles lineups are a big problem we're currently facing because it can put us in a hole to start the match."

The Comets' four-match win streak came to an end in a close one against Concordia. UTD again lost two out of three doubles matches. The teams split their singles matches, winning three apiece.

"We also changed some strategies involving how we should play," Yerragudi said. "We've also been working on the

mindset coming into a doubles match because we have to acknowledge that doubles [are] super important for us."

UTD lost a close match against ETBU on April 21. They lost in all three doubles matchups, but had a better performance in the singles matches, winning four of six. Graduate Andres Gonzalez, Yerragudi, sophomore Benjamin Dubois and senior Nick Boquet were the victors, each winning in two sets.

In the first two matches, Dubois and Gonzalez were the only doubles pair to win their matchup. They are 3-2 as a team this season. Dubois and Boquet were the only players to win all their matches across opponents.

With the conclusion of the regular season, the Comets now look ahead to the ASC Championship tournament starting May 10. They enter as the second seed, their first finish below the first seed since the 2018-19 season.

"We are pretty confident that our team is one of the best in this conference," Yerragudi said. "If we just really stay focused during doubles, our momentum will shoot up and we should win our matches."



UTD ATHLETICS | COURTESY

The protester's polemic

Abbott's violent backlash against student protesters unjustly violates their constitutional rights

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
News Editor

As Gaza solidarity encampments pop up across the U.S., UTD's own are among those protesting the involvement of their academic institution in what the International Court of Justice has called a "plausible genocide." As Gov. Greg Abbott pushes for Texas to respond violently to campus protests while suppressing student activism through executive orders, it is the duty of UTD's administration to protect the constitutional rights of students and the burden of the students to hold their administrators accountable in the face of egregious violations of supposed founding ideals of America.

Despite the very first amendment to its constitution ensuring the right of people to "peaceably assemble," throughout history, the U.S. has routinely violated citizens' right to protest through extreme forms of disproportionate violence meant to squash dissent. When West Virginian coal miners pushed for better working conditions in the 1920s, the U.S. government escalated the conflict by dropping bombs on its citizens. As peaceful civil rights activists demanded equal protection under the law throughout the 1950s and '60s, they were met with widespread police brutality and lynchings. And most analogous to the current protests, when college students protested for an end to the Vietnam war in 1970 at Kent State University, they were attacked and killed by the National Guard and police officers. Now, students at Columbia, Yale and UT Austin face police violence, arrest and expulsion; hundreds face jail time after direct confrontations with police as some encampments are forcibly shut down — the complete shutdown of entirely peaceful demonstrations.

A coalition of pro-Palestine groups have called for UTD to "divest from death" by removing its investments from weapons manufacturers such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing and Raytheon. Students have also demanded that campus administration recognize the suffering of the Palestinian people in addition to official criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza — which nations like South Africa have called an "extreme form of apartheid." So far, administration has ignored demands for divestment, a call for a cease-fire and recognition of the particular suffering

affecting Palestinians and has refused to acknowledge official resolutions passed by Student Government. UTD cannot claim to support free speech in campus policy if it decides to call in police to unjustly suppress students' protests. It must resist the pressure from aggressive morally bankrupt leaders like Speaker of the House Mike Johnson and Abbott.

The solidarity protests developing across the nation draw on a strong legal history, which protects these types of political demonstrations. Over the decades, the Supreme Court has established standards about what is and is not protected under the free speech clause of the First Amendment — and attempts to infringe on these rights are constitutional violations. *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969) established that "students do not shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate" by specifically protecting symbolic acts of speech — the wearing of black armbands — as a means to protest the Vietnam War. *Cohen v. California* (1971) protects the right of people to use certain words and phrases considered offensive when expressing a political message, specifically protecting an individual protesting the Vietnam War by openly wearing a jacket that said "Fuck the Draft." And *Texas v. Johnson* (1989) protects one's ability to engage in symbolic speech such as burning the American flag to protest the Reagan administration's policies. These key cases, which still stand as good law and set the precedent for current constitutional interpretation, indicate that UT Austin's actions in response to the nationwide encampments are abhorrent violations of the free and peaceful expression the student activists are engaging in. Students should not be arrested for engaging in peaceful political expression, and yet hundreds across the nation — including 55 at UT Austin — have been arrested, and while charges for some have already been dropped, all those detained now have the arrest on their background until they go through the expensive process of having a court expunge their records.

Currently, UTD has managed not to infringe on the constitutional rights of students, with events such as walkouts, Chalk the Block, poetry nights, and now the most recent sit-in within the Administration Building occurring without police brutalizing students. These events, while disruptive, are all



ANIKA SULTANA | MERCURY STAFF

lawful; *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969) set the standard that prohibiting demonstrations and speech can only happen if it would cause "imminent lawless action." Peaceful protests, symbolic art and poetry are all constitutionally protected, while falling within the limits outlined by the Court, regardless of their goal and whether you personally agree with that message. This is echoed within UTD's own policy, SP5001 sec. B.7, which states that making an argument about politics, religion, ideology or academic ideas is not harassment "even if some listeners are offended by the argument or idea."

While UT Austin's policy Sec.13-204 provides the same protections present in the UTD policy, their policy did nothing to stop university administration from calling in troopers from the Texas Department of Public Safety to violently end the peaceful protest — a protest whose itinerary included abominable criminal acts like studying, a pizza break and art workshops. Over 50 individuals were arrested as Texas brutally ended the walkout Wednesday. Students weren't the only target of DPS troopers' assault which beat protesters into submission, as a Fox 7 reporter covering the walkout was arrested and charged with criminal trespassing — the main charge UT Austin pursued before Travis County dropped all 57 charges because of their complete lack of standing. There is nothing stopping UTD from following in Austin's footsteps, except for student pressure on administration to ensure they remain accountable.

Even after 54 years, the killing and arrest of student activists, which occurred during the Kent State massacre continues to live within the American consciousness, and this week has seen an unacceptable upsurge in similarly violent action taken against peaceful demonstrators who simply want their schools, to which they pay thousands of dollars in tuition, to stop supporting a "plausible genocide." If even the International Court of Justice and the United Nations — incredibly slow-moving organizations that normally struggle to acknowledge issues — are willing to recognize the crisis as a "plausible genocide," then you know Israel is doing something atrocious to the Palestinian people as it continues to occupy Gaza.

This academic year has already seen UTD administration remove the Spirit Rocks and end OCRS, threatening students' free expression and safety — students should continue working together en masse, by organizing protests and emailing Benson about their issue with how other campuses have handled protests, to ensure their fundamental rights to demonstrate are not trampled on as well, should UTD follow in the footsteps of campuses around the country. The UTD administration must ensure students can continue safely engaging in their constitutionally guaranteed right to assembly. So listen up administrators: the nation — and Comets — are intently watching what happens next.

Letter to the Editor

In response to the March 18 article on SG's ceasefire resolution

JADE STEINBERG
Courtesy

Dear UT Dallas Mercury, Students, Staff and Administration,

In a recent issue of *The Mercury*, an article addressed the recent SG resolution on a permanent cease-fire. A quote in this article shared views of the off-campus organization, "Jewish Voice for Peace," which does not speak for all American Jewry. This anti-Zionist organization is composed of Jewish and non-Jewish individuals and represents a minority of Jews. From a 2023 AJC survey, 80% of American Jews said caring about Israel is an important or essential part of being Jewish. In another recent survey, 66% of Jewish college students in the U.S. said Jewish students pay a "social penalty" for supporting Israel's existence.



JADE STEINBERG

JVP does not speak for the American Jewish community.

There is a difference between legitimate criticism of Israel and criticism that demonizes, delegitimizes or holds the Jewish state to a double standard — that's when it crosses the line into antisemitism. For example, perversely blaming Hamas' devastating terrorism on Israel, as JVP did, is blatantly antisemitic. While our university celebrates diversity, encompassing a range of opinions and political beliefs, the Jewish community here has not felt secure since Oct. 7. Elevating the token voices of antisemitic groups only further harms the Jewish community.

Sincerely,
Jade Steinberg
President of Hillel at UTD

Editorial

Know your enemy: Comets should direct DEI ban anger at legislators, not just admin



FATIMAH AZEEM
Editor-in-Chief

Fatimah Azeem

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
News Editor

Gregorio Olivares Gutierrez

JACK SIERPUTOWSKI
Managing Editor

Jack Sierputowski

MARIA SHAIKH
Opinion Editor

Maria Shaikh

On April 9, UTD President Richard Benson sent a schoolwide email stating that the Office of Campus Resources and Support — created in the wake of Senate Bill 17, which would have continued some of ODEI's still-legal programs — would be eliminated. Four months into the DEI ban taking effect, students across the state are reeling from the loss of treasured programs and administrative support. But are we directing our grief and rage toward something productive?

Comets have voiced their disappointment about the closing of OCRS on online platforms and in Student Government meetings alike, with particular ire directed toward UTD's administration. However, if we want to reverse these changes, we need to target state legislators that passed the DEI ban as well as the administrators forced into compliance.

SB 17, passed in June 2023 and effective Jan. 1 2024, prohibits Texas universities from having offices related to diversity, equity and inclusion or endorsing such "ideology," as Sen. Brandon Creighton calls it. In practice,

this means employment, admissions or programs which reference "race, color, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation" — including sensitivity trainings — are prohibited, and universities risk losing funding for noncompliance. With DEI and its short-lived successor OCRS eliminated, well-loved campus supports like the Galerstein Gender Center — known for being a gender-affirming safe space and providing free sexual health resources — are left in legal limbo, potentially to never return which in turn places a greater strain on the resources still offered by the Student Wellness Center.

Comets have been outspoken about

their disapproval since the bill's signing, and the anger and uncertainty around losing ODEI without any kind of replacement system is understandable. *The Mercury* stands with DEI, and we, too, are hurting from the loss. But aiming anger at UTD administration for dissolving ODEI and OCRS is unproductive.

When the ban went into effect, universities such as UT Austin dissolved their DEI offices and issued dozens of layoffs without any alternative offices established for the students who relied on those supports. On the other hand, UTD immediately developed the OCRS to take on whatever DEI-related programs it legally could, and initially promised no staff layoffs — though that assurance holds little truth now that approximately 20 jobs are set to be eliminated come April 30. The OCRS dissolution came after Sen. Brandon Creighton sent a letter threatening to withhold funding from SB 17-noncompliant universities to every state-funded Texas university system.

The letter itself, while not mentioning any inciting incident, followed a conservative watchdog group's video that clearly tried to paint UTD as pursuing illegalized DEI policies under a different name. Put simply, administration was strong-armed into eliminating ODEI and OCRS against their will. The blame rests largely on the state legislators that support the ban, especially Creighton's authorship and strict enforcement.

It is in these legislators' favor for students to direct backlash toward university administration, who are the forced executors of the law, rather than the elected officials who actually wrote and passed it. Since these legislators don't have to do the "dirty work," they can

outray and maintain their reputations come election day. Administration cannot change state law; those who antagonize administration for taking away DEI shows they lack an understanding of who is calling the shots.

However, criticizing administration for dissolving the OCRS — a perfectly law-abiding office — because of their excessive caution is reasonable and necessary. UTD administration was SB 17-compliant since DEI's elimination, even when creating OCRS, but eliminating the office has now removed critical campus supports, which is unacceptable despite it being the "safer option."

UTD's administration should have enough backbone to defend its programs in the face of inactionable threats from legislators. Other aspects of UTD's DEI shutdown, such as the promise of no employee layoffs that was promptly reversed, are fully administration's fault. We believe in maximum transparency; administration should not have made a promise it could not keep, and it's only fair to horizontally transfer former OCRS employees into other administrative roles or reinstate them. But the shutdown itself was not brought on by admin's wrath.

We empathize with every student who feels unsafe, abandoned or enraged by Texas' harmful stance against DEI, and we encourage you to contact your representatives or elect new ones this November. Comets need to understand the bigger picture and fight for change where it is most likely to succeed: the ballot box. Demand the return of OCRS by emailing President Benson, but primarily focus your energy on calling and emailing your elected officials to demand a reversal of this ban.

Mercury's senior send off: stories, advice, goodbyes

Empathy is not a weakness: a letter from the Editor-in-Chief

FATIMAH AZEEM
Editor-in-Chief

"I've been waiting for someone to call me. No one has even tried."

These were the words Katheryn Montgomery, the victim of a horrific case of animal abuse, told me after our hour-long interview for my first major crime story.

It became clear to me in that moment why I had persisted for weeks to find her; it bothered me how the initial news reports glossed over the visceral impact of this unimaginable crime and its aftermath. What about the victims? What message do we send if we only feature the criminal? Montgomery's story was one worth telling, and a story I'd refuse to publish without the victim impact clearly defined.

Working on this piece is one of the most rewarding projects I've worked on at my time in *The Mercury*. It is one of many thorough news stories I've worked on — from potential free speech violations to the students' political response to the atrocities in Gaza — that helped solidify my love for journalism and the importance of

diving deep to highlight the people in my community in meaningful ways. Attending a university with over 30,000 students, the fear of stories going untold and a commitment to truth is what drives me toward journalism. I wonder how many people are waiting for someone to contact them like Montgomery was.

I wasn't always this passionate about working as a student journalist. I joined *The Mercury* as a bright-eyed freshman, excited by the idea of working at a newspaper after taking a journalism class in high school. Though I couldn't pinpoint why at the time, I was drawn to the thought of learning about individuals in my community — of amplifying the voices often missed in larger media coverage.

But there was a problem. I was too sensitive.

I cared about everything a little too much. I was quiet, preferring to connect with individuals over networking endlessly with sources. I was easily bothered on behalf of others, and I believed my sensitivity to people and their experiences would be a hindrance in this line of work. So, I tried to suppress this part of myself, thinking it would help me cope with a dreary world a bit better and perform

my job more efficiently.

But I could not have been more incorrect. Empathy is not a weakness. It is, in fact, the reason I'm so committed to my work — the reason I'm willing to go the extra mile to ensure my sources receive fair representation and my articles are to the highest quality possible. Being quieter helps me better listen to my community members and understand the value in their narratives, which in turn helps me amplify critical stories effectively. Having a soft heart — caring about other people openly, unabashedly and boldly, documenting the moments that matter to people — is the greatest strength one can have, not just as a reporter, but as a person trying to improve the world, and in my specific case improving the school paper itself.

This year, I had the honor of serving as Editor-in-Chief of *The Mercury*, a position that has profoundly impacted me on a personal, social, and professional level. I'm currently the longest standing member of *The Mercury*; I've worked in many positions over the past four years, and I've seen editors, staff members and advisers — with their distinct personalities, knowledge and wisdom — come and go through the revolving door. Rebuilding the solid

journalistic knowledge base lost during COVID-19 and passing it onto future generations of reporters has been imperative for me this year. And this year has been my favorite by far — it has seen the most important and impactful major news coverage, and our core team is the most remarkable I've worked with during my time at *The Mercury*.

I stayed at this work intensive and underpaid position because of the people I met at the paper 100%. We have had no shortage of colorful personalities at this newspaper, but what connects us all is our sincerity in creating a valuable publication for our student body. Our team believes in our mission — we work incredibly hard, and the sleepless nights covering breaking news is all worth it.

Serving such a large campus is unique challenging but deeply rewarding. I hope each story I've worked on has been positive for my readers in some way — whether that means it was touching, informative or entertaining to read. My journey as a student journalist has been one of discovery, and I'd encourage anyone who values integrity, compassion, and commitment to truth to try their hand at working at our student newspaper.

Preserving student media: accountability's last stand

JACK SIERPUTOWSKI
Managing Editor

Picture this: it's 11 p.m. on a Friday, and you have 16+ hours of newspaper production on Saturday and Sunday. Suddenly, you receive a late draft and open it. There are no sources, the tone is off, the writer seems to not know what quotations are, and everything will have to be redone before it goes to print.

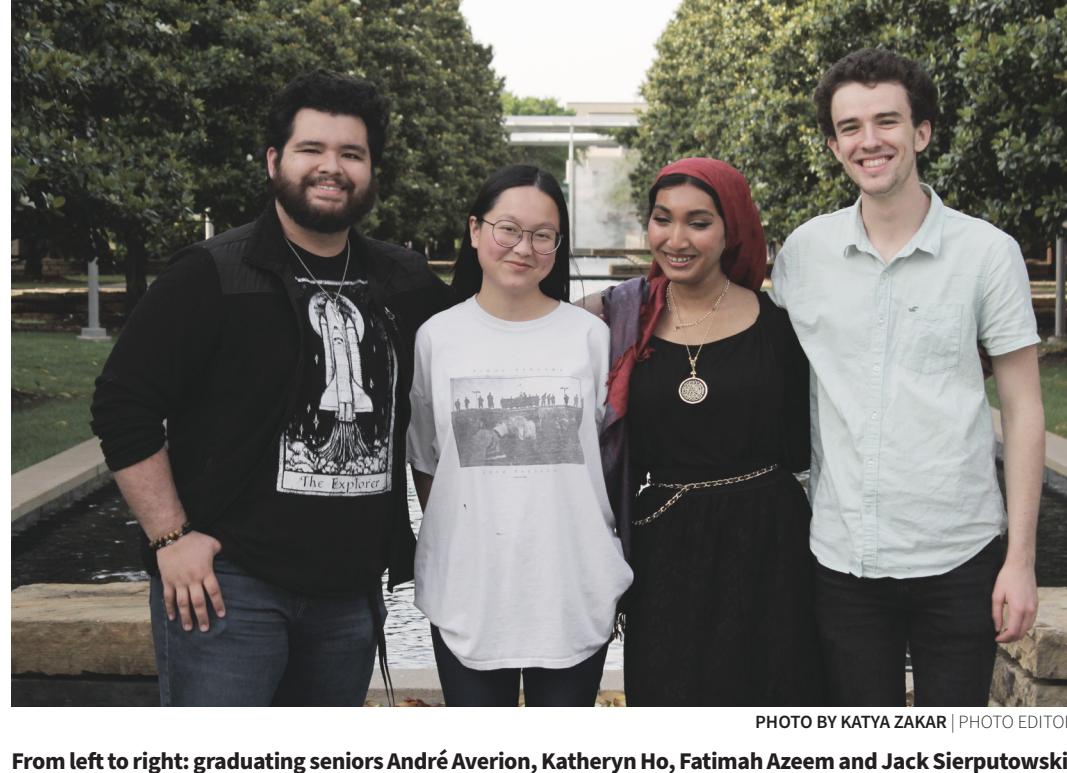
Here at *The Mercury*, if you don't suddenly develop an anxiety disorder upon entering management, then you must have nerves of steel. This job is endless, heart-wrenching stress and nauseating social conundrums day in and day out. So why would anyone be insane enough to choose this line of work? Why is it that I find it so rewarding?

When I was younger, I had an infantile fantasy that I would grow up to be a private investigator. Of course, I also wanted to avoid car ownership and travel the world — both completely incompatible — but I wouldn't let that stop me. I had dreams of being just like Marvel's Jessica Jones: stopping bad guys, asking questions that no one else wanted to and delivering justice by shining light on things that "the mainstream" didn't want to confront.

I was stupid. Comic book heroes aren't real and vigilantism certainly isn't anything to aspire to. Luckily, just as I moved from adolescence into young adulthood, I found a new outlet for these investigative dreams: journalism. Reporting is the perfect excuse to be prodding around in private places — it's basically getting paid to be nosy. And it's critical in places like college campuses, where students — who are generally young and poor — are very easily taken advantage of by the powers that be. And when it comes down to it, who except students is going to keep some of these university administration members accountable?

Forgive my weird populist ideals fantasies, but there is another reason college journalism is so rewarding: it is a bastion of old school freedom in a country where the corporate press gets less and less free by the year. According to Reporters Without Borders or RSF, the United States currently has a press freedom index of 45/180. RSF rates the U.S. somewhat low for a few key reasons: while the government does not directly censor the press, in the past few decades, local media has died as national media has become more politically polarized. And most concerningly, "many popular news outlets are owned by a handful of wealthy individuals."

You want to know what is so great about college



From left to right: graduating seniors André Averion, Katheryn Ho, Fatimah Azeem and Jack Sierputowski.

PHOTO BY KATYA ZAKAR | PHOTO EDITOR

newspapers, in my eyes? They are one of the very few places in this country where hyper-local journalism has continued to thrive, where media is still accessible and responsive to the actual concerns of everyday people. College media is an island of accountability in a sea of national-level newspapers that are so out of touch, they cannot truly care about their readers.

This is what is so special about *The Mercury*. If you have a problem with a story, you can write a letter to the editor, and there's a good chance it will get published. If you have an issue with our editorial practices, you can email our Editor-in-Chief, and she will sit down with you and talk things through. We are not a brick wall like large-scale newspapers. We are students, and we serve students.

When I first joined this organization, I entered every pitch meeting terrified. The upper management was strict and critical, and I felt I had to fight an uphill battle just to prove my story ideas were good enough. Now, I'm the one who criticizes writers, and I understand why my mentors did it. Because they cared — not just about the publication, but also about holding its members to a high standard, making sure we are always pushing to be better. And we will continue to push to be better journalists, like we always have despite the many setbacks along the way.

Anyone who has worked at a college newspaper

is familiar with the eternal problem of the revolving door. Just as one editorial team becomes fully competent and the best at journalism they can be, it's over, because they've graduated. Some years this is a terrifying transition, where a few ingenues are left to fend for themselves, embarrassing themselves and floundering around journalistic practices as they try to scrape by.

But it's not always so hopeless. This year's management team has passed the torch to a group of extremely intelligent, experienced and competent replacements who are about to begin a brand-new era for the publication. And as outgoing management from 2024, we are incredibly proud of what we've done, and we are so excited to see what *The Mercury* does in the future.

Why would anyone be insane enough to choose this line of work? Because regardless of how stressful or anxiety-inducing college journalism may be, it is an enriching and transformative experience. This job has taken me through the best and worst times of my college experience and fundamentally changed the person I am and the way I see the world. I can attribute most of my values, political beliefs and professional aspirations directly to lessons I learned and people I met at *The Mercury*.

To all new management members: good luck, and we all look forward to discovering what unique neuroses you develop in your time with *The Mercury*.

Mercury mascot takes last distribution tour around campus

ANDRÉ AVERION
Distribution Manager

I've done it all at *The Mercury*, and I earned the in-house title of "Mercury Mascot" not just by being the office goblin, but because I'm one of the loudest and proudest members of both this newspaper and our Comet community. This is my story and my farewell.

"The only reason I read Mercury is because of that stud over there," Temos allegedly said, while pointing at me.

I've been a writer, a photographer, a graphic artist, an interim social media manager, a podcast host, the office therapist and most importantly, the Distribution Manager for both *The Mercury* and AMP. I've contributed the most stories in Mercury history with 149 articles, I'm a lead writer of our crime and breaking news stories, I revived campus interest in our sports column, I brought back the Mercury Morning News podcast as the first official collaborative content between all Student Media organizations and I developed the first official AMP trading card game, which will be released soon. My writing is so indispensable that several entire issues have been dubbed "André Papers" because I make up a quarter of the stories. At different points, multiple staff members recommended I run for Editor-in-Chief, but I knew the role I leave today was the one that would have best served our Comet community.

It sounds like bragging, but honestly, it's more a cry for help. Writing nearly 25 stories a semester compared to the expected average of 1-2 per cycle is borderline insanity to staff and a miracle to my editors.

We've probably even met before. I've represented *The Mercury* at every Freshman Orientation since 2022, twice a week I'm found at nearly every Mercury booth in the Student Union and biweekly I'm driving a golf cart delivering papers around campus. It would be hard not to

notice me when I've personally handed out papers to at least 12,600 students and staff, and I've delivered over 105,750 Mercury papers and 40,800 AMP magazines across campus.

My efforts did not go unnoticed. In 2023 I competed against Division One university outreach and distribution teams — including those from the Ivy League — at the Collegiate Media Association, where I won for *The Mercury* the Best Campus & Community Engagement award, a university first and a long time coming.

In fall 2021, I walked into the Student Media suite for the first time, welcomed by my future boss howling about his "League of Legends" losing streak. After an hour of waiting, I eventually met my interviewer and future friend, Fatimah Azeem. I gave my first, second, third and fourth pitches before Azeem hired me as one of two opinion columnists, and when I first started, I was not very good.

However, after being told I was an awful writer enough times, I began to find a style and audience if nothing else to spite my managers. I was stubborn and bullheaded, but somewhere in between, I became proud of what my peers and I were putting out. We were the student voice, and students deserved to know that we were highlighting their stories and achievements. I joined that year's Editor-in-Chief, Tyler Burkhardt, on several distribution runs and booths to hand out papers to show the university that we were here and worth listening to. Outreach was slow at first, and more often than not, students would be surprised we even had a newspaper. But I knew one day, I would change that.

After a few months of escapades with Burkhardt, he sat me down with our former media adviser, Chad Thomas. They proposed I receive a stipend as an official Distribution Manager of not only *The Mercury*, but also their rival

organization, AMP, both of which were fresh out of a civil war with each other. I was welcomed into *Mercury* management with open arms that summer and into AMP management that fall.

There have only been more eventful stories since then: forcing my roommate into a Spider-Man costume for Meet The Press, accidentally planning and hosting a speed dating event, getting lost underneath The University of Minnesota, shaking hands with the reporters of the Watergate Scandal in Washington D.C. and pretending to be a student adviser to get free drinks in Atlanta — sorry, J-Stew. Not to mention the favorite stories I wrote: goat yoga on campus, the total solar eclipse, the upcoming Filipino Community Center, the Spirit Rock removal, the alum plane crash, the UTD animal cruelty story, our transition to DII in the NCAA, the installment of Police Chief Brent Tourangeau, NASA choosing UTD and meeting the cast of Chainsaw Man are among my favorites.

Before I give my final farewell and thanks, I do have advice for the Comet community. Firstly, get your hearing checked, it is shocking how I have snuck up behind hundreds of Comets in an ancient 800 lb golf cart. Secondly, stop saying you can't read, you had to write an essay to get into UTD, and the joke doesn't get any younger. Thirdly, never stop believing in yourself. I've met countless Comets, staff and students alike, who are changing the world and their community every day, whether during college or after. Never be afraid to share those successes, and never be afraid to make history by taking a chance or by sharing why your voice and your story matter.

Be the change you want to see. Representation and truth for everyone starts by speaking up, and there's no better place to start than at *The Mercury*.

Stay sexy, Comets.

The trials and tribulations of Graphics Editor

KATHERYN HO
Graphics Editor

Despite being *The Mercury*'s Graphics Editor, I will write my farewell, not draw it. My two years at *The Mercury* encapsulate a wide range of emotions and my journey has been, as Editor-in-Chief Fatimah Azeem said, "riveting."

My Mercury lore began in August 2022, when I joined the publication as a staff photographer. My responsibilities included spending \$20 on photogenic food and taking photos of every nook and cranny of a cafe, only for the editorial board to publish a photo of a paper cup display. Initially, I also had to drive to downtown Dallas to snap some shots of a historic house, including its beautiful interior, only for them to publish the most boring front-facing angle of the building. Another task was shooting the American Idiot musical at the UTD theater. There were so many photos of the actors' over-the-top expressions and striking movements, only for them to use the lamest full-stage photos. Sometimes, I wondered if I should remove all the boring shots before submitting the images so they couldn't keep choosing them.

Fast forward to December of the same year, where the previous Graphics Editor asked me if I wanted the position when she left. Being extremely underqualified, I declined the offer. I am glad she never gave up and tricked me into accepting the position by inviting me to Graphics Editor training. After two training sessions, she referred me as the Graphics Editor to our lovely administrative assistant when I had not confirmed my decision yet. I was basically roped in at that point. I love telling my staff that I became the Graphics Editor because no one wanted the position. I will continue to believe this until someone fact-checks me on this. Because why was I even nominated?

Travelling to downtown Dallas for photo assignments continued in my role as a Graphics Editor. Besides picking up the most distance-challenging photo assignments, I also make graphics and design pages. I barely drew in my time at *The Mercury*. I'm not a drawer, I'm a collager. If you picked up a physical copy of *The Mercury*, there is a 25% chance that I designed that one really cool page, given that there are usually three other people besides me who design artisanal pages.

Enough about my job, I stayed with *The Mercury* because of the people. Most people I talk to are from *The Mercury*. I would not have a social life without *The Mercury*, although it also hinders my chance to have a social life outside of it. On the other hand, I don't socialize that much regardless. Therefore, forcing myself to talk to fellow nerds really helps. I love my Mercury people.

I genuinely think I became a management member at the right time, because I would not trade this management and editorial board for another. It is a tight-knit group of nerdy people. We do silly things and have a terrible work-life balance here at *The Mercury*. For example, spending every other Friday and Saturday in the *The Mercury* office did wonders for my sleep deprivation, doubling my all-nighters. I guess this is some sort of Stockholm syndrome.

I want to thank the previous Graphics Editor, Jamie Lin, for believing in me. Thank you to the 2023-2024 editorial board and management team for making me feel every emotion known to man, from depression and rage to happiness and pride.

When I heard about our many CMA and TIPA awards, I was ecstatic. My people did that, especially my top-tier graphics department. If any artist is reading this, I am so proud of you. You brought these awards home. You guys are talented artists and amazing staff members. Thank you for being my staff.

I also want to thank UTD's other student media organizations. I love talking to AMP people. Radio playlists rarely miss. UTD TV is getting cooler every day. Thank you to Heather Valcik for being our lovely administrative assistant with colorful makeup and a great sense of fashion. Thank you for feeding us candies and energy bars. Thank you to Jonathan Stewart, better known as "J-Stew," for being our adviser. I loved it when you said you did not know what we talked about half the time and pretended you didn't know for the other half, because that is exactly how I perceived you.

What is my goal for the future? I have so many, but none of them are coming true right now. I'm trying my best in life, as always. I plan to return for an administrative role in Student Media so watch out. This is not the last you will see of me. Peace out for now.

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